

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

November 1st 2015 All Saints Day

Who do we think we're celebrating on All Saints Day? Is this the day for all those names in the Church Calendar, that sequence of the individual saints whose separate days we observe during the year? Or is it wider than that? Are we giving thanks for all the great men and women of faith down the ages, so many of whose names we don't know? Or is even that a bit restrictive?

We normally use the word Saint as a title, like 'Sir' or 'Dame', for people whose lives have been remarkable in the service of God, and coloured by miracle. So it's very easy to operate with a rather narrow understanding of the word. The capital S is the thing. Of course when the capital S is used, when Saint is indeed a title, a mark of honour, then we are talking about people whose lives have been extraordinary. The Feast of All Saints uses the capital S, clearly; so the surface meaning is that we celebrate all the Saints with that title, with its capital S, from St Mary the mother of Jesus onwards. And what a glorious heritage that is.

But the word saint also works with a small 's'. In the New Testament it's used that way at least 45 times, especially by Paul. Then it simply refers to the members of the churches, the followers of Christ. It is not used for special, heroic figures. Can we move away from this hero model, then, this counsel of perfection that talk of saints can cause? Can we talk of saints in the realm of the ordinary, where only-too-fallible human beings get caught up in the extraordinary thing that is life in Jesus Christ? Even, dare I say it, when they don't think of life in those words, in terms of belief?

It's sad that this biblical use of the word saint has all but dropped out of our language. What's much more likely now is that the word is used critically – 'that churchy lot, those do-gooders, they think they're saints.' In everyday language, when we describe someone as saintly, we're usually marking them apart as something quite special. So if we tried to revive the word for ourselves, we'd look more preeningly self-regarding than painfully self-aware.

We all know, or know of, people we'd want to call saintly. I can think of a couple, for example, who for 25 years or so fostered disabled children. They already had four children of their own (two by birth, two adopted), but kept a riotous ménage of others. Some of them were very disabled, like the girl who was simultaneously blind and deaf, as well as physically unable to move herself around. In all they fostered about forty such children, giving desperately-needed respite to parents or carers.

Now this was saintly work by any standards, using that word in its more modern sense. But they certainly wouldn't want to be called saints. As it happens they're Christian, and so in the strict biblical sense they are saints (with a little 's'). But they would be bothered at the idea of being marked out as heroic and special. And in one important way they would be right.

Because although from our external viewpoint we can see that their work with those foster children was quite remarkable, in most other ways they are ordinary people with a pretty average set of human foibles and failings. Furthermore, there are countless people the world over whose kindness and bravery and active love of others is the sort of thing that Jesus said marked out the sheep from the goats, but who are not Christian or indeed religious in any overt way. But when Jesus tells that parable of Judgment Day, those who win the king's favour are not chosen for what they say they believe, but for what they have been doing. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick.

Let's call them 'saints in ordinary'. That can be us. God so loved us in our ordinariness that he died for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Not *despite* our ordinariness; but because being human, being a person, means that while we all get things wrong, we are also all made in his image. And when that image, that icon of the godly, that pilot light of the divine, lights up in us - by the grace of God - then we can find ourselves doing things which people want to call saintly.

It is sometimes a struggle to realise that potential in us. And we need to help each other to do the same by thinking of ourselves as a community of deep mutual commitment and encouragement. That kind of living, holy living, emerging as it does from the faltering and faultiness which will always be there in us, will be part of God's transformation of the world. It is a transformation that happens because of God's transformation of us. That transformation of us, that holy-making, is charged with grace; electrified by the Spirit at work in us, and by our consequent work in the Spirit, feeble as that so often is.

And this is all very real! The Beatitudes, as we call them, those *Blesseds* that we heard in the Gospel reading just now, are so well-known that we risk treating them like a familiar, favourite song. But Jesus is giving us a manifesto: something to be realized, made real - not just hummed along to. They're not just verbal brocade, chosen to go with the finery I'm wearing here. So a life open to transformation by God's grace is about being poor in spirit (ie spiritually humble), gentle, hungry for what is right, merciful, pure in heart, peace-making, courageous in the face of persecution...

So let us celebrate this feast of All Saints by thanking God not only for the great heroes of the Church, but also for making us all saints; for making us his children; and for loving us to the end, however unsaintly we so often are.